
Service please! Rethinking public library Web sites

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Abstract

A survey of Australian public library Web sites reveals that very few libraries have gone beyond establishing Web sites that provide information about their static library resources and services. Few attempts have been made to deliver a high level of interactive library service to online clients. This paper examines some of the issues that public libraries need to consider in order to rethink the way that the Web can be better used to provide interactive, real time online services. Issues include: commitment of staff and financial resources to online services; developing and maintaining Web technology skills; reclaiming the Web from IT departments; and individual effort versus collaboration.

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Introduction

It was popular in the 1990s, when the Internet became graphical and the source of all information was, arguably, only a Yahoo away, to pronounce the demise of the public library. However, the traditional services of libraries remain popular with Australian national, state and local government libraries enjoying 99.4 million visits in the 12 month period ending June 2000 (ABS, 2001). People continue to crave social interaction and visit libraries because they can browse shelves full of interesting materials with other library users; meet friends; involve their children in storytime and other activities; and seek out a librarian to assist them to locate information or reading material.

Nonetheless, the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, has had a significant impact on public libraries. The Web has not only changed the way that customers seek and use information but also the way that librarians seek, use and deliver information. Librarians were early adopters of Web technology with the first Australian public library Web sites beginning to appear in 1994. These early sites were often developed by librarians and focussed on providing information about the library service and, in some cases, the local council and community.

Things have, no doubt, progressed since the early experiments in creating library Web sites with most libraries, nowadays, providing access to their library catalogue and subscription databases as well as continuing to provide information about the library service (addresses, opening hours, lending policies, and suchlike). But progress has stalled, somewhat, in Australia with very few attempts having been made to capitalise on the expanding developments in Web technologies and to create a true online branch library.

Statistics for the future

Australia ranks highly amongst Internet users around the world behind Sweden, France, Singapore, South Korea, Germany, USA and Norway (NOIE, 2002). How effectively people are using the Internet remains a bit of a mystery but there is statistical evidence that suggests that, as the lifestyles of Australians become increasingly busy with work and



social commitments, they are taking advantage of the convenience that the World Wide Web gives in providing access to the growing amount of useful information and services.

According to the 2001 ABS Census around 37 per cent of Australians use the Internet (ABS, 2002). The National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) puts this figure higher with 64 per cent of the Australian population having access to the Internet and 52 per cent of Australians being active users (NOIE, 2002). In the 12 month period to December 2001, NOIE reports that Australians used the Internet for a range of activities including:

- using e-mail (48 per cent of users aged 14 years and over. An increase of 30 per cent since December 2000);
- general surfing (37 per cent, an increase of 37 per cent);
- searching for information on companies (27 per cent, an increase of 47 per cent);
- accessing news and current affairs (21 per cent, an increase of 40 per cent);
- Internet banking (21 per cent, an increase of 75 per cent);
- playing games (21 per cent, an increase of 50 per cent); and
- participating in interactive discussions (19 per cent, an increase of 26 per cent) (NOIE, 2002).

NOIE further reports that in the six month period to September 2001, 50 per cent of active Internet users aged 16 years and over (14 per cent of the Australian population aged 16 years and over) purchased something online with 36 per cent of the purchases being for books and magazines (NOIE, 2002).

To get a bit of a picture of the kind of sites and Web services that Australians might already be accessing or might access in the future, we can look at selected site ranking reports provided by Ranking.com[1] (www.ranking.com).

Ranking.com performs market research upon a statistically, geographically and demographically significant number of Web surfers. By recording their Web site visits, Ranking.com calculates the ranking of the top 750,000 most visited Web sites.

Not surprisingly Internet search engines rank highly. Ranked at number three, at the time of writing, Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) continues to be the most popular search tool

world-wide, followed by Google (www.google.com) at number eight. Lycos (www.lycos.com), Mamma (www.mamma.com), Altavista (<http://av.com>) and Overture (www.overture.com) all appear in the top 100 most visited sites.

National and state library sites are not badly represented. The Library of Congress Web site (www.loc.gov) rates at number 764 in terms of the number of unique visitors accessing the site, while the National Library of Australia (www.nla.gov.au) comes in at number 13,971 with the State Library of New South Wales (www.slnsw.gov.au) following at number 22,752 and the State Library of South Australia (www.slsa.gov.au) ranked at number 28,534. Given the relatively low demographics that they are likely to attract, compared to state, national and international sites, it is not surprising that Australian local government sites are a little harder to find ranked on Ranking.com. Nonetheless, the Brisbane City Council site is located on Ranking.com and comes in at a respectable placing of number 20,276.

Taking a look at a selection of other sites:

- News.com.au (www.news.com.au) ranks at number 3,805.
- Allexperts.com (www.allexperts.com; a free online information and advice service) ranks at number 7,484.
- Liveadvice.com (www.liveadvice.com – a commercial information and advice service) ranks at number 1,501.
- Ebrary (www.ebrary.com) ranks at number 18,028 closely followed by Netlibrary (www.netlibrary.com) at number 19,713.
- Amazon.com (<http://amazon.com>) continues to be popular at number 35.
- Australian banks rank fairly well with the Commonwealth Bank (www.comm.bank.au) well placed at number 2,123 followed by the National Australia Bank (www.national.com.au) at 7,580 and the ANZ Bank (www.anz.com.au) at 12,904.
- The Internet Public Library (www.ipl.org) does well with a ranking of 3,059 while Victoria's Virtual Library (www.libraries.vic.gov.au) is well represented at 110,118.
- Ebay (www.ebay.com) comes in at number 25 with the Australian arm (ebay.com.au) doing well at 8,115.

- WebFlicks (www.webflicks.com.au), a relatively new Australian online DVD rental service is doing good business at number 87,220 (Ranking.com).

What deductions can we now make from the above information and how can we relate this to the direction that library Web sites should be taking in the near future?

First of all, it is apparent, particularly from the figures from NOIE, that Internet use in Australia is increasing. How far this will continue to increase is uncertain but, nonetheless, we can assume that between a third and half of the Australian population are currently active Internet users.

The fairly good rankings of national and state library sites, as well as library portals such as the Internet Public Library and Victoria's Virtual Library, indicates that there is something in or about these sites which attract visitors. No doubt, these sites provide resources and gateways to information that visitors find useful but we should, probably, also take into account that a significant number of Internet users are also library users who are familiar with using libraries to locate resources to satisfy their information needs, and hence, seek to use library Web sites for the same purpose.

Despite the bad times that the e-book market has suffered recently both Ebrary and Netlibrary have ranked quite well indicating that, globally, the e-book industry is not yet dead.

The good rankings of Allexperts.com and Liveadvice should be of interest to all librarians. That these sites rank so well indicates the limitations of search engines, as well as users, in being able to locate information on the Internet. It also indicates that, even on the Web, people seek out real people to get advice or information on a variety of topics. Libraries, of course have been providing personalised information services for decades but, in Australia at least, they have been slow in providing these services to clients over the Web.

Finally, a service that has been operating in the USA for a few years and is now beginning to take off in Australia is online video and DVD rentals. WebFlicks is an Australian example of this type of service (see below for more information). It only has an Australian market, and has only been operating since July 2002 but is ranked by Ranking.com as the 87,220th most popular site on the

Internet. WebFlick's relative popularity indicates that a significant proportion of Australians appreciate the convenience of being able to rent DVDs over the Internet and have them delivered to their doorstep.

Public library Web sites today

In 2003, the vast majority of library services in Australia have developed a Web presence. Nearly all of the Australian public library Web sites provide information about the library service and static branches. Most provide Web access to the library catalogue (around 80 per cent) with fewer providing access to subscription databases (around 60 per cent) and links to useful Web resources (around 68 per cent). Very few libraries, however, have attempted to develop their Web sites as unique branch libraries where visitors can undertake a variety of transactions that are not necessarily hampered by a lack of social or physical human interaction. About 18 per cent of public library Web sites offer an e-mail reference service and only a handful have incorporated functions such as online registration, online training resources, multilingual pages and resource selection and delivery services.

With few exceptions, the focus of most Australian public library Web sites continues to be as an information resource about physical libraries. Even the Web catalogue, which is included on most public library Web sites, refers to materials held in a physical library and while users may be able to reserve items on the Web catalogue they still need to visit a library branch to retrieve the materials.

There have been in the past, and continue to be, impediments to libraries developing more interactive, service based Web sites which will be addressed later. Nonetheless, in the face of a growing Internet population in Australia and the convenience of accessing competitor sites such as free advice and commercial information services, it is time for libraries to consider how they can take advantage of existing and emerging Web technologies to develop Web sites which become a one stop shop for delivering and accessing a wide range of library services.

Public library Web sites tomorrow

Before we look at reshaping public library Web sites we should consider some things

that should not be included on a Web site. The key thing to remember about physical libraries is that they are places and not just full of books. As such, libraries have a long history and tradition of providing entertainment and events that require physical participation. I would suggest that activities such as children's storytime, seminars, launches and presentations ought not be attempted to be duplicated or delivered online. Not that these activities could not be delivered online but that they are likely to be less successful online because their success is, generally, dependent on physical social interaction.

For a long time, there will be library users who will never use the Internet. There are also people who will only use elements of the Internet such as e-mail. Given this, it will be necessary for a long time, if not forever, to maintain physical libraries. Nonetheless, there is, also, a growing number of people who through lifestyle decisions or other reasons find it inconvenient to visit physical libraries and find it convenient to use the Web for a range of activities including banking, grocery shopping, planning and booking holidays, renting DVDs, etc. In reinventing public library Web sites it is, therefore, necessary that the delivery of library services over the Internet should attract users by enhancing convenience. To do so, public library Web sites need to be established and operated as a unique branch library rather than simply a repository for information about a physical library. With a few exceptions, mentioned earlier, a service oriented Web site should enable users to do online what they would traditionally be able to do in a physical library.

Australian public libraries vary in the range of services that they provide so there is no single model to be used to define what should be contained on an online library Web site. Typically, though, a service oriented public library Web site would include, at least, the following functions.

Web catalogue with delivery option

The library catalogue is the heart of any library service. It records and provides access to the range of materials held by the library. As mentioned earlier, however, the simple inclusion of a Web catalogue on a library Web site does not make the site a virtual branch library. The library catalogue, even when included on a Web site, is likely to continue to refer to materials held in a physical library.

Unless a mechanism is available to deliver materials without the user having to visit a physical library, the idea of a virtual branch library is obviously compromised.

The Bayside Library Service (www.bayside.vic.gov.au/library) in Victoria provides such a service where, by making a small modification to their Spydus Library Management System, users can reserve items on the Web catalogue and request to have them delivered to their home or business address. Up to 30 items can be requested at any one time. A \$5.50 fee per delivery applies or members can subscribe for annual fee of \$110.00.

An alternative model is one offered by WebFlicks. WebFlicks is a commercial DVD rental service where, for a monthly fee, members can create a wishlist of DVDs and have them delivered by Australia Post to their home or business address. The monthly fee is on a sliding scale depending on the number of items that the member has out at any one time, from \$27.50 a month for two DVDs at a time, to \$73.00 a month for eight DVDs at a time. As soon as a DVD has been watched and returned, in the reply paid envelope supplied, another DVD from the wishlist is delivered. Members also have the ability to determine the priority of DVDs delivered from ASAP to whenever.

In both models, there is a relatively small price to pay for convenience. Bayside Library Service charges a \$2.20 fee for each reservation to be picked up at a physical library so choosing to have a bulk number of items delivered can end up being considerably cheaper than picking items up from a branch location. With WebFlicks, so long as you are already a regular borrower of DVDs, the costs involved are likely to be similar or less than you would pay for rentals at your local video store.

Online registration

The whole concept of an online public library falls down if it is not possible for users to register online for library membership without the need to ever venture into a physical library. This very idea is likely to bring fear into the hearts of many librarians whose policies require that a legitimate form of identification be proffered before any membership registration can be finalised. However, let's consider the problem for a moment.

Identification is required by most libraries to confirm that the person wishing to register is who they say they are and to verify the address they have provided in order to minimise loss of materials. In an online world where people may wish to register for library membership in order to access online databases or other online resources provided by the library to members, address details are largely irrelevant. If, however, a member wishes to borrow physical materials and have them delivered to their home or business address, then the act of delivering to that person and recording the address of each delivery should be sufficient to satisfy the security demands of the library service.

Libraries lose items through theft all the time (either by walking out the door of a library or by people moving address and taking the library items with them). This will continue to occur with members who have registered in person at a physical library and have shown legitimate identification and it is likely to occur with online members. Obviously, libraries do not want to institute practices that increase the chances of items going missing and so by employing a WebFlicks type model of delivery (when an item is returned another item is delivered) libraries can reduce the number of items that are out at any one time to a single member and thus reduce the impact of possible loss and, at the same time, satisfy the needs of customers who have a continuous flow of materials without them having to venture into a library building.

Interlibrary loans functionality

Just as the Web does not contain all information nor do individual public libraries hold every print resource, so is there still the need for an interlibrary loans service in the physical as well as the online world. While Z39.50 or XML access to a range of catalogues or library networks would be the best case scenario, it would be sufficient for a public library to provide an online interlibrary loan request form, either as part of the Web catalogue or as a standalone form which is retrieved offline and processed as part of the library's normal acquisitions or interlibrary loans routines.

E-commerce facilities

As with online registration, the absence of e-commerce facilities reduces the ability of a

public library Web site to act as a true virtual branch. There are a number of issues related to e-commerce which we will not go into here but, nonetheless, strategies need to be devised to ensure that customers continue to use the service via the Web and are not put off from using a Web service or a library service due to the inconvenience of having to visit a library to pay an overdue fine or delivery fee.

Many Internet service providers and Web hosting companies now provide access to secure servers and online shopping software which can be incorporated into a library Web site to facilitate payment of accounts. Utilising such software – which is not integrated into the library management system – would involve a degree of additional manual work but the advantages of using basic shopping software goes beyond overdue fine and fee payment. Such software can, additionally, be used to book attendance at events (whether free or fee based), as well as conducting online book sales and sales of library merchandise.

An alternative to providing e-commerce facilities on a library Web site is to invoice customers for any financial transactions and make payment available by a variety of methods, including: EFTPOS, credit card, cheque, BillPay and cash. While customers may not be able to instantly make payments from the Web site, providing a number of options which are flexible and convenient is likely to ensure that customers continue using the service.

Interactive reference services

Libraries in Australia, and around the World, have been slow in establishing interactive online reference services which have opened the way for free and commercial competitors such as Allexperts and Liveadvice. Some attempts have been made to provide e-mail reference services where customers can e-mail a question to the library and receive a response, often containing links to Web sites which provide the answer or information, by return e-mail. Still only about 18 per cent of existing library Web sites provide this service and response times vary considerably from 24 hours to ten days.

There are also a number of collaborative e-mail reference projects currently being undertaken across Australia including the Ask a Question service accessible from Victoria's Virtual Library and Sydney Public Libraries

Answer Reference Questions (SPARQ) in NSW which is a cooperative project provided by Sydney public libraries belonging to the Metropolitan Public Libraries Association. These services are available to any member of the public within the respective states and seek to answer general reference questions (but not providing in depth research) using Web and printed resources.

Recently the Council of Australian State Libraries has initiated a pilot project offering a real time interactive online reference service called AskNow!. AskNow! is a collaborative service shared between the national and state libraries and enables Web users to login to the service and ask a question of a real librarian in real time. The advantage of such a service over e-mail reference services is that it allows the reference librarian to conduct a reference interview and precisely ascertain the user's needs and locate relevant information from Web and printed resources. The AskNow! service is accessible from the national and state libraries Web sites and is open to all Australians.

Neither the AskNow! Service nor any of the available e-mail reference facilities currently provide 24/7 service but, nonetheless, they are beginning to create the basis for providing enhanced reference and information services to online library users. It may not be feasible for all libraries, in either the short or long term, to provide a substantive online information service, either via e-mail or by utilising real time interactive reference software. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly possible to link to an Australian library related Web site which provides such a service. And so, it should soon be a thing of the past that local residents lack access to quality information services via library Web sites.

There are limitations to utilising a state-wide or national online reference service: questions relating to local issues and local community information will probably be answered with less immediacy than a more general question, or may not be answered at all. As such it is recommended that, even if a third party service is used for general questions, that facilities be provided on a library Web site for residents to seek local community information and ask questions about local issues. This may simply be the provision of an e-mail address of a relevant person within the library service.

Subscription databases and e-books

Most, if not all, libraries in Australia have access to a range of subscription databases such as Ebsco's Australian New Zealand Reference Centre and Thompson Gale's Health and Wellness Resource Centre. Additionally, most state public library Networks have negotiated deals which enable some of their subscription databases to be made available to remote library members via the library Web site.

Libraries have not been so quick, however, to jump onto the e-book bandwagon. A number of libraries have experimented with e-book readers and access to services such as Netlibrary within the library building. But no Australian public libraries have yet taken a big leap in subscribing to online e-book services and making them available to online library users. Australian libraries have, rightly, been cautious, given the current instability of the e-book market and uncertainty about its future. Nonetheless, the number of unique visitors using the Ebrary and Netlibrary sites, as reported by Ranking.com, gives proof of the popularity of e-book services. So someone is using these sites and getting value from them.

While some market research should, necessarily, be conducted prior to investing in a Netlibrary collection or subscribing to the Ebrary service, the inclusion of such services on public library Web sites is likely to increase the usefulness of the site and enhance its ability to provide research material and valued information resources.

Value added resources

Users of library Web sites are likely to be readers and/or seekers of information. As such it is necessary to continue to provide value added resources that are available to users of physical libraries. These include: new book lists, reading guides, pathfinders, annotated subject links to quality Web sites, local studies materials and photograph collections.

Library information

On any library Web site, there is still a need to include information about the library service, including the physical library. For example, Web library users will still need to know the locations and opening hours of the physical library in case they chose to visit or pick up materials from one of these locations. They will still want to know about events and

activities occurring in the library. But a library Web site should also provide selective information that is likely to be relevant to a user who will rarely, if ever, visit a physical library. Library Web sites should no longer simply be a repository of brochures, available in printed format, that have been converted to pdf or HTML.

Anything is possible in an ideal world

Australian public libraries do not operate in an ideal world with adequate budgets, appropriately skilled staff in sufficient numbers and available technology to automate routine tasks and build perfect online Web libraries. Most of the library Web sites that exist in Australia today are relatively low maintenance which, perhaps, highlights the low priority that many libraries place on maintaining a Web presence.

There are a number of issues and impediments that libraries will need to address if they are to redevelop their Web sites along a service oriented approach. Not surprisingly, the issues and impediments fall into three main categories: staff, technology and budget.

Staff

In the late 1990s, librarians saw the advantages of the Web and quickly went out and learnt HTML, in order to establish their own library Web sites, and in some instances, developed their first local council Web site. However, the Web moved ahead rapidly, and those librarians who had initially learnt Web technology did not venture very far beyond HTML as it started to become more complex – they could not dedicate additional time and enthusiasm to learning new technologies such as asp, php, xml, e-commerce and so on.

Nowadays, the majority of public library Web sites have been incorporated into the council Web site and are maintained and managed by the council IT department. The role of librarians, to a large extent, has been relegated to providing updated information about the library service to the council Webmaster. If library staff are actively involved in the maintenance of the library Web site, then in most cases, the people involved are also involved in maintaining library technology, including public access PCs and the library management system;

providing staff and public training in the use of library technology; investigating and acquiring subscription databases and services; working on the library's information desks; and a range of other IT related and general duties within the library. No wonder, then, that many library Web sites have not progressed far from the early HTML sites of 1995.

If Australian public library Web sites are to progress then sufficient skilled staff are going to be required to maintain, develop and undertake backroom technical routines – without such a development, it will be impossible to effectively deliver a range of services online. This, of course, is easier said than done. Libraries are no less busy than before, and, in most cases, staff resources are already stretched to the limit. Additionally, library staff may no longer have the required skills to take advantage of current and emerging Web technologies. Even if it were possible for larger libraries to restructure and retrain library staff to develop and maintain service oriented Web sites, such a strategy is never likely to be feasible in small, often regional, library services which operate on three or four full-time equivalent staff. However, there are possible solutions and there are ways forward, in spite of this.

Technology

In an ideal world, libraries would be able to purchase plug and play integrated library management systems that facilitate and support the creation of a service oriented Web site with the features described above. While integrated library management systems have improved in terms of their ability to provide access to enhanced Web catalogue content and digital resources, they continue to lack the ability to fully service remote library users. It would be desirable for them to incorporate modules to:

- manage requests for delivery of materials to a home or business address;
- facilitate e-commerce and events booking transactions; and
- provide online reference functions.

As such, libraries would either have to develop inhouse technologies to achieve the aims of an online library branch, modifying current third generation library management systems to perform some of the required functions of an online library branch; and/or

purchase additional third party software specifically designed to perform functions such as e-commerce and real time reference services.

The first option is probably not feasible for most libraries, given the previously mentioned problems of the availability and skills of staff currently working in libraries, as well as the other costs involved in developing inhouse systems. The second option is possible, but is likely to go only part of the way in providing an integrated solution to the provision of an online branch library. Nonetheless, if libraries were to look at modifying current or future library systems, either themselves or by the vendor, then their concentration should be focussed on modifying modules to manage home delivery requests and to incorporate e-commerce functionality through the Web catalogue. Finally, there are a number of excellent third party products specifically designed to facilitate and manage interactive online reference services. It is unlikely that vendors will incorporate this sort of technology into library management systems in the short term. And so, to facilitate an online reference service, other than an e-mail service, it will be necessary for libraries to purchase such a product. This, of course, brings us to our third issue – cost.

Cost

Most public library Web sites existing in Australia today, especially where they are incorporated into the council Web site and managed by the council IT department, are relatively low maintenance and, consequently, attract a low cost to the library service. The delivery of an enhanced Web site, which effectively services the needs of remote library users, would necessarily attract a greater cost in terms of additional software, staffing and skills development.

In order for libraries to establish a meaningful online presence it will be necessary to develop watertight business cases, and to consider seriously the potential to restructure in order to make staff available to manage a Web based branch library. Libraries will also need to utilise the expertise of IT staff to install software and implement Web services that meet the libraries and remote library users needs, and, where possible, incorporate the purchase of

additional software into the IT budget rather than the library budget.

However, it must also be considered whether or not it is practical, cost effective or even possible for individual libraries to develop their own unique online branch library. Are there economies of scale that can be achieved by collaborating on a regional, state or national level?

Collaboration versus going alone

It is possible for individual libraries, particularly large library services, to develop their own Web based branch library. The Bayside Library Service in Victoria has come very close to developing an online branch library by incorporating:

- online registration facilities on to their site, with library cards mailed to the address stated on the online registration form without the need for customers to visit a physical library;
- delivery services to home and business addresses;
- e-mail reference facilities; and
- access to subscription databases.

Even if a more minimalist, service-oriented approach to Web sites were the goal – one which incorporated third party reference services such as AskNow!, and did not include e-commerce functionality – it is unlikely that most small library services (or even some larger ones), would be able to operate and maintain the service.

The option then is to develop a service-oriented Web approach collaboratively. There are already a number of examples where libraries have worked collaboratively to develop Web services on a regional or state level, including SPARQ, Victoria's Virtual Library and libraries.sa (www.libraries.sa.gov.au). In addition, both the State Library of Western Australia and State Library of Tasmania already facilitate access to the public library catalogues across the State via a single user interface (LISWA (www.liswa.wa.gov.au) catalogue and TALIS (www.talis.tas.gov.au)). And even with a collaborative approach, there may still problems with technology and workload, and some tasks will still have to be performed at a local level.

Nonetheless, there are a number of things that can be done on a collaborative level to defray costs and minimise the workload.

These include:

- developing a single site on a regional, state or national level which acts as a gateway to the Web sites and Web catalogues of individual libraries and includes basic information about each library including new events and services;
- incorporating, on a single site, professionally selected links to quality Web resources with the maintenance of the links being shared across member libraries;
- sharing the cost of interactive online reference software across a group of libraries on a regional, state or national level, as well as sharing the workload in staffing the online reference service (alternatively, existing services, such as AskNow! could be incorporated into the single site servicing member libraries);
- sharing the costs and workload involved in purchasing, establishing and maintaining e-commerce facilities;
- sharing the costs involved in maintaining a courier service for home and business deliveries; and
- developing consortia to subscribe to and share e-book resources.

Finally, something that is rarely done in Australia – the sharing of staff resources. Since it is hard for most small libraries, and some large libraries, to obtain staff who can maintain Web services for a single library, it is appropriate to consider using skilled staff across a number of libraries to develop and enhance the Web services within a specific region. Employing people in this way would reduce the overall costs for each library service. Nevertheless, careful collaboration with other providers in the region would be necessary in order to maintain a consistent approach to the delivery of Web services across the state or nation.

Reclaiming the Web

Librarians were early advocates of the Web. In many cases they were involved in establishing council Web sites, or at least advocated the necessity to establish council sites. As Internet technologies developed and

became more complex, IT personnel started to take a greater interest in the Web.

Since Web sites run on computers and require some knowledge of computer applications and computer languages (HTML, Java, JavaScript, XML, etc.) most councils consider the Web and Web technology as IT issues and have by now handed over responsibility for the council Web site, including the library site, to the council IT department. Librarians allowed this to happen because Web technologies and languages were getting more complex and other priorities, such as public access PCs, training demands and new integrated library management systems, began to dominate their workload.

Typically, what has happened with council and library Web sites is that pure technology solutions have been developed. These solutions might be aimed at facilitating the storage and retrieval of council documents to meet legislative requirements; or they may support the provision of limited interactive services such as an online library catalogue, or in some cases, the ability to pay rates and other council fees over the network.

What is lacking from a purely technological approach to the development of a council Web site is a recognition that local government is a complex business with a variety of tasks, responsibilities, services and stakeholders. A good Web site is not simply about good technology, good information or good design. An effective Web site is about all of these things working together in harmony with good management, service orientation and consultation. Take away the platform that the Web runs on and the important design elements that make Web sites look good, and you are left with the core of what the World Wide Web is about. At the heart of The World Wide Web is information management and customer service, the traditional domain of libraries and librarians – something that they know a lot about, and arguably something that IT personnel know little about.

The development of library and council Web sites needs to be a collaborative effort between IT professionals, graphic designers and information professionals in consultation with business units, stakeholders and customers. If it is not, then these sites, in the majority, will continue to be flat storage mediums for council and library information

which do not meet the needs of the organisation or users.

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Note

- 1 Ranking.com™ The marketing research data necessary to produce this report is provided FREE by Ranking.com.

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